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THE TIMES OF NEHEMIAH AND EZRA.

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It would be a pleasure to be able to say that all progressive scholars were agreed as to the facts and the mutual relation of the lives of Nehemiah and Ezra. Such, however, is not the case, and all that the student can do is to keep his mind open, and to endeavor to recognize elements of truth wherever he can find them, "proving all things, holding fast that which is best." The subject is of great importance. The prospects of the Jews when Nehemiah and Ezra appeared were almost as bad as they could be, both from a political and from a religious point of view; and it was by the faith, the insight, and the tenacity of these great men that the Jewish people in Judea were delivered, and, so far as their dangers were religious, finally delivered. When did they live? That is the first question, and it will be well to give below the dates of the Persian kings which enter chiefly into the recent discussions of the subject.¹ Both Nehemiah and Ezra are said to have lived under Artaxerxes, and since Darius, *i. e.*, Darius I. (Hystaspis), is mentioned in our book of Ezra just before the account of the mission of Ezra, it is plain that the compiler of the great historical work, Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah, considered the Artaxerxes of the scribe Ezra (and consequently also of the governor Nehemiah) to be the first king of that name. Of course, the compiler might have been mistaken; the Artaxerxes referred to in the memoirs of Nehemiah and Ezra (portions of which are extant²) might have

¹ Artaxerxes I. Longimanus, B. C. 465-425; Xerxes II. (forty-five days), 425; Sogdianus (six months), 425; Darius II. Nothus, 424; Artaxerxes II. Mnemon, 405-359; Artaxerxes III. Ochus, 359-339; Arses, 339-336; Darius III. Codomannus, 336-332.

² See DRIVER, *Introduction*.

been Artaxerxes II. In this case, Jewish history between Darius I. and Artaxerxes II. is a blank. But the arguments which have been offered for the later date of the Jewish patriotic leaders appear to be inadequate; both Nehemiah and Ezra must have accomplished their providential tasks between 464 and 425 B.C.

Which of the two came first — Ezra or Nehemiah? In Ezra 7:7, 8 Ezra's journey to Jerusalem is placed in the seventh year, and in Neh. 2:1 Nehemiah's journey is placed in the twentieth year, of Artaxerxes. Unfortunately, dates, especially those in the obscure period of the Persian domination, cannot be accepted without careful criticism. No doubt, the dates which Ezra or Nehemiah put down would be correct, but there may be transcriptional errors in our texts, or the compiler who used their memoirs may have brought the chronology into harmony with his own system of dates. Supposing the seventh year of Artaxerxes to be really Ezra's date, it is not unnatural to conjecture that the great scribe made an attempt before Nehemiah to repair the ruined wall of Jerusalem, because "in the days of Artaxerxes" (so, at least, it is stated in Ezra 4:7) a complaint was addressed to Artaxerxes that Jews who had come up from their land of exile were building up "the rebellious and the bad city." It so happens, however, that there is strong reason to believe that the supposed official documents in Ezra 4:7-22 are literary compositions without any historical value. It was not thought morally wrong in ancient times to produce such works, provided that the object to be gained was good. That Nehemiah repaired the wall is historically certain; we also know that he met with great opposition, and can understand that an early writer may have defended Nehemiah's course by inventing a precedent for it. As early as the time of Cambyzes, he said, an attempt had been made to repair the city and its wall, and this was only stopped by the malice of the Samaritans.³ The later compiler knew nothing of Cambyzes (if his name really occurred in the original document), and substituted the familiar name Artaxerxes. He may even have confounded the Darius of the earlier narrator

³There is no valid evidence that the feud between the Samaritans and the Jews began much before the time of Nehemiah.

with Darius II. or Darius III., each of whom succeeded an Artaxerxes.

That Ezra did not precede Nehemiah is one of the most certain results of a strict critical examination of the Hebrew text, though all scholars may not agree with this. Nehemiah is nowhere mentioned as present in Jerusalem in the memoir of Ezra; Ezra nowhere in that of Nehemiah. The reference to Ezra in Neh. 12:36 is an interpolation of the compiler; in Neh. 12:33 Ezra (= Azariah in 10:1) is a gentilic or family name. On the supposed references to Nehemiah in the memoirs of Ezra space forbids me to speak here.⁴ That Nehemiah found no considerable Babylonian Jewish element in the population of Judah is clear from his own record. If Ezra's company had reached Jerusalem before Nehemiah, some trace of this could not have failed to appear. At the same time we can hardly place Ezra *after* the final departure of Nehemiah. That statesman's second visit to Jerusalem, in which religious reforms fill such a large place, appears to presuppose that Ezra had broken the ice, but had not been as successful as the progressive party at Jerusalem and in Babylonia desired. Between the two governorships of Nehemiah seems to be the best place for Ezra. Not improbably, instead of "seventh year" (Ezra 7:7, 8) we should read "twenty-seventh year," *i. e.*, B. C. 438.

Nehemiah's first visit to Jerusalem was in B. C. 445; of this, from the present writer's point of view, there can hardly be a doubt. When did he return to Susa? The usual answer is, in B. C. 433. It is stated in Neh. 5:14 that Nehemiah acted as governor "from the twentieth to the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes the king, that is, twelve years." But this seems to be inconsistent with Neh. 2:6, where the king only sends Nehemiah on condition that his cup-bearer makes a speedy return. Nehemiah is sent for a special object; this object—the restoration of the wall—he takes in hand at once, and accomplishes in fifty-two days (Neh. 6:15). The context of the passage

⁴ See Guthe's volume on Ezra and Nehemiah (Hebrew edition) in HAUPT'S *Old Testament*, or the article on "Tirshatha" in BLACK'S forthcoming *Encyclopædia Biblica*.

referring to the twelve years suggests that Nehemiah wrote his memoir soon after the completion of the wall (see vs. 16). Probably the text of Neh. 5:14 has suffered, and for "thirty-second" we should read "twenty-second," thus allowing two years (B. C. 445, 444) for the first visit of Nehemiah, which amply suffices for the works ascribed to him in the memoir. The mistake "thirty-second" would naturally arise from the circumstance that Nehemiah's brief second governorship is placed in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes, *i. e.*, B. C. 433 (Neh. 13:6).

We, therefore, take up the work of Nehemiah first. That a member of such an insignificant nation as the Jews should have been invested with the important office of a cup-bearer to the Persian king is matter for surprise. It was a distinction coveted by great Persian nobles to serve the great king in this capacity. No doubt the Jews of the dispersion had already shown their ability for commerce, and we may, perhaps, assume that Jewish gold had found its way into the coffers of the government, and that appointments like that of Nehemiah were the official recognition of Jewish loyalty. Probably, too, the Jews of Judea had given proof of fidelity when in B. C. 448 the revolt of the Syrian satrap Megabyzos offered them an excuse for disloyalty, and the Judeans who arrived at Susa on a visit to Nehemiah, B. C. 445, may have been aware that they had much to hope for from Artaxerxes.

The state of Judea was in many respects fitted to awaken patriotic anxiety. The cause of what I may call orthodox religion had, no doubt, been improving; so much is implied by Nehemiah's narrative, and probably by the greater part of the third section of Isaiah (Isa., chaps. 56-66). But in proportion as Judea began to sympathize a little more with the orthodox Jews of Babylonia, the attitude of the surrounding peoples, and especially of the half-Israelites commonly known as Samaritans, became less friendly. The Samaritans probably desired the revival of the old Israelitish nationality, and the permanent abolition of the old distinction between north and south. For this, from a political point of view, there was much to be said,

but to students of the prophetic writings it could not help seeming the worst and most dangerous of delusions. For it was not a revival of the old people of Israel which the prophets had foretold, but a new divine creation—a people working righteousness, and caring for nothing but how to please God. Ideally, such a people needed not the defense of material walls (Zech. 2:4, 5), but practically it was all-important to indicate the separateness of the new people—for the orthodox minority must have regarded themselves as the only true Israelites—by walls and gates, and also to guard against the sudden assaults of those outside who were unfriendly to the prophetic ideal. This was why Hanani laid such stress on the defenseless condition of Jerusalem in his reply to Nehemiah. When he said, “The wall of Jerusalem also is broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire” (Neh. 1:3), he was not referring to any recent catastrophe, but accounting for the “affliction and reproach” of the remnant in Judea which had escaped captivity.⁵

Nehemiah’s energy triumphed over all internal opposition. The high priest himself, whose sympathies were decidedly non-orthodox, was foremost among the builders of the wall. But there were other opponents who could not so easily be put down. Chief among these were Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem or Gashmu. Sanballat, in the received text, is called the Horonite, and it is natural that some should have inferred that he was a native of the Moabite city of Horonaim. For Tobiah is called an Ammonite, and the third member of the league an Arabian. Besides, we are expressly told that some of the people, and of the priests and Levites, had married Ammonitish, Moabitish, and other foreign wives. Nevertheless it is evident from the correct text of Neh. 4:2⁶ that Sanballat must have

⁵ The meaning of Neh. 1:2 is disputed. But “captivity” here means, not “captives” (as in Ps. 68:18), but “deportation,” as in Ezra 9:7: “We have been given up . . . to the sword, to captivity, and to spoiling,” where “to captivity” clearly means “to be carried captive.” The inhabitants of Judea who had been left there by Nebuchadrezzar are referred to.

⁶ “And he said in the presence of his kinsmen and of the (other) nobles of Samaria, What are these Jews doing? will they restore their rampart? will they fill up the stones?” etc.

been a Samaritan; in fact, Shōmērōnī, "Samaritan," might, by transcriptional errors, easily become Hōrōnī, "Haronite." And since Tobiah is such a close ally of Sanballat, it is most probable that "Ammōnī" is a scribe's error for "Ophnī," *i. e.*, Gophnite.⁷ Gophna, which is often mentioned in Josephus, was within the old north-Israelitish border, between Bethel and Shiloh, on the road to Shechem. It is obvious, too, that the nobles of Judah (including a grandson of the high priest) would prefer Samaritan (north-Israelitish) wives, where these could be had, to Moabitish and Ammonitish. Nor is any allusion made in the third section of Isaiah to the Moabites and Ammonites, but pretty clear references occur to the Samaritans (see especially Isa. 57:3). It was the threatened loss of their civil and religious privileges at Jerusalem which irritated the Samaritans, and Nehemiah's attitude (see Neh. 2:20; 6:3) must have done much to strengthen the growing feud.

We find Nehemiah also complaining of the hostility of Jewish prophets (Neh. 6:10-14), and though Tobiah and Sanballat may perhaps have bought up one of the prophets (Shemaiah) to induce Nehemiah to commit a doubtful action, yet this prophet must have had some preliminary antipathy to Nehemiah, or he would never have accepted the fee. Not improbably the prophets of Jerusalem were unwilling to abandon the hope of political independence which the older prophets had certainly encouraged. According to Sanballat, some of the Jewish prophets had even announced in public that Nehemiah was the destined (Messianic) king (Neh. 6:6), and certainly it is very possible that the prophets may, on Nehemiah's first arrival, have hoped that he might turn out to be the "Branch" (Jer. 23:5; 33:15; Zech. 3:8; 6:12), and when their hopes were disappointed through Nehemiah's immovable loyalty to Persia, they may have turned against him, somewhat as some of the later Jews appear to have turned against the Lord Jesus, when it was clear that he would not head a revolt.

That Nehemiah had the Persian authority at his back was no

⁷ "The servant" is also to be explained by a transcriptional error. "The Arabian" was written (but too soon).

doubt a circumstance greatly in his favor. But had he not also been a man of indomitable courage and energy, he could not have cowed internal opposition as he did. Ezra, too, had a firman—at least, it is a common belief—but Ezra was not successful like Nehemiah. Nor was the next administrator of Judean affairs after Nehemiah a success. He was probably a Jew, and his real name seems to be disguised under the strange-looking word read by the editors of our Hebrew Bible *hat-tirshatha* (E. V. “the Tirshatha”); probably it was a Persian name, the same which is given in Neh. 7:7 as Mispereth (= Mispar in Ezra 2:2; Aspharasus in 1 Esdr. 5:8), the name of one of the leaders of the Jews in “the province.”⁸ But whoever he was, he was not equal to coping with the priests and nobles of Jerusalem, who soon afterward prove to be as intimate with the Samaritan leaders as if Nehemiah had never administered his great rebuff to Sanballat (Neh. 6:1–8).

Nehemiah once more, at Susa, doubtless followed events with much uneasiness. Babylonian Jews would also be grievously discontented with the heterodox reaction. A famous expert in the law, named Ezra, went to the Persian court to obtain the royal patronage for the scheme which was devised, or rather for so much of it as it seemed worth while to communicate to Artaxerxes. All that Nehemiah had spoken about to the king in B.C. 445 was the reparation of the city wall; the war which he meant to wage with heterodoxy and Samaritanism he kept shut up in his breast. Ezra acted similarly. These are his doubtless authentic words:

“Blessed be Yahweh, the God of our fathers, who has put such a thing as this into the king’s mind, to beautify Yahweh’s temple at Jerusalem, and has caused me to find favor before the king and his counselors, and before all the king’s mighty princes” (Ezra 7:27, 28).

⁸ That the eleven persons mentioned were simultaneously at the head of the Jewish community we can, I think, hardly venture to assume. Three of them (Joshua, Raamiah or Regem-melech, and Bilshan or Bilsarezer) were demonstrably contemporaries of Zerubbabel and Zechariah, but it is likely that the other names belong to persons who were prominent at a later time. The second on the list is Nehemiah. That Nehemiah’s successor (in some sense) should also be mentioned need not surprise us.

There is nothing said here about Ezra's ulterior objects, and in particular nothing about the introduction of the recast of the sacred legislation which he took with him to Jerusalem. No doubt the expression "has caused me to find favor" will cover something more than the mere beautification of the temple. But that "something" must not be so stretched as to include all the measures which Ezra actually attempted to take on his arrival at Jerusalem. To judge from the phenomena of the books of Haggai and Zechariah and of the memoir of Nehemiah, no return of Jewish exiles on a considerable scale had as yet taken place. It must have seemed fitting, even if there had constantly been freedom of intercourse between Babylonia and Judea, that such an imposing company as that of Ezra should have the support of royal patronage. Ezra would naturally apply for and obtain a firman, and it is not impossible that the document in Ezra 7:12-26 is founded on that which was really given to Ezra, and which may have been preserved in the archives at Jerusalem. That this is a very probable suggestion I do not say. To me, and to some other scholars, the document has the appearance of a Jewish composition. There is nothing in it which a Jewish scribe could not have imagined, though no fair student would deny that there is skill and thought in his composition. I doubt whether more than one document from the Persian court was preserved in the archives at Jerusalem, viz., that relating to the building of the temple (Ezra 6:1-10), and even this does not appear to have been handed down quite in its original form. Observe, too, that even Nehemiah's firman was not transmitted to posterity.

It would, of course, have been gratifying from a historical point of view to be able to decide otherwise. To know upon the best authority that Ezra went up to Jerusalem with the object of enforcing a strict observance of the law, in the sense which he himself attached to it, would throw a fresh light on the history of the times. The worst of it is that if the document is right, the subsequent narrative must, it would seem, be wrong. That Ezra should have had such a document by him, and made no use of it, is inconceivable. He says himself that (unlike

Nehemiah) he would not request a military escort, because he had "spoken to the king, saying, 'The hand of our God is upon all those for good that seek him'" (Ezra 8:22). This certainly does not look as if he trusted in an "arm of flesh," and thought of instituting an inquiry into Judean religion from an orthodox Jewish point of view, but upon Persian authority. To say with Meyer that "the origin of Judaism can only be understood as a product of the Persian empire," *i. e.*, as result of Persian intervention, is to underestimate the influence of the Babylonian community. Jerusalem was both physically and morally unable to maintain a position of which the wealthy and enlightened Jewry in Babylonia disapproved. All through the so-called post-exilic period the Jews of Judea were largely dependent on the support of the foreign brethren. And when Ezra had brought to Jerusalem such an adequate representation of the Jewish world outside, so that the leading members of the community were no longer exclusively reactionary, it became certain that sooner or later the direction of religious affairs would fall to the orthodox.

It is remarkable that, so far as our evidence goes, Nehemiah made no attempt in B. C. 445-444 to deal with the question of mixed marriages. During his second visit he did not leave the matter entirely on one side, but it will be noticed that he treated those who had foreign wives with considerable leniency. The fact that he took up the question at all shows that it had passed into a new stage since his first visit. In 445 his object was to get the wall restored by the united efforts of the whole community; in 433 it was no longer his interest to conciliate all classes equally, though at the same time he was unwilling to go to the same lengths as the more enthusiastic and less statesmanlike scribe Ezra.

What Ezra actually did is *apparently* recorded in Ezra, chaps. 9, 10. The narrative, however, is so full of improbabilities that one is tempted to regard it as to some extent an imaginative work—the production of a mind more concerned for ecclesiastical orthodoxy than for historical fact. Should any reader take up this suggestion, however, I beg him not to throw the responsibility

for this work on Ezra; there were writers after Ezra's time quite competent to supplement and rewrite whatever Ezra may have left, in the interests of the edification of posterity, and for the honor of Ezra himself. So much, at any rate, is clear from Ezra 10:15 that the great scribe did not find it at all an easy matter to reform the marriage customs of Jerusalem, and it is not impossible that one of those who were opposed to Ezra was moved by God's Spirit to write the book of Ruth as a reply to Ezra's exhortations. It is no objection to the book of Ruth that it is but a poetic idyl, or, if you will, a romance. It would convey to zealots like Ezra "the wise lesson that not all foreign wives should pass under the same condemnation; yea, that there are some among them who, for their devotion to Israel's God and to members of his people, are worthy of the highest praise."⁹ Doubtless Ezra deserved to be blamed, even if he did not resort (or was not allowed to resort) to such extreme measures as are related in chaps. 9 and 10 of our book of Ezra.

We are equally ignorant how Ezra made public the law-book which he had brought from Babylonia. In spite of Neh. 8:1-12, we can hardly believe that such a novelty as Ezra's law-book (which contained the so-called "Law of Holiness," *i. e.*, Lev., chaps. 17-26, and the oldest parts of what we may properly call the Priests' Code¹⁰), was at once accepted by the whole people. Nor can we, I fear, venture to accept the account of the formation of the congregation of the true Israel in Neh., chaps. 9, 10, which presupposes the dissolution of the mixed marriages and the general acceptance of the law-book. But we should most probably find, if a faithful report of the proceedings of Ezra and his friends could be recovered, that what we now read is not so much a romance as an imaginative resetting of a few of the traditional facts in the light of more recent circumstances.

I am afraid it must be added that some of the traditional facts have been deliberately omitted, out of reverence to Ezra himself. Nothing could be gained, I think, by covering over this necessary result of criticism by a mass of unmeaning generalities.

⁹ KAUTZSCH, *Sketch of the History of the Old Testament Literature*, §6, 4.

¹⁰ See DRIVER's *Introduction* and KAUTZSCH's *Sketch*.

Some of the facts were too unpleasing for the editors of the next age to put into circulation; the standards of literary practice in those days did not forbid their suppression. Ezra was by no means a failure, on the whole, but his successes were not such as he most desired, and they were hugely modified by the results achieved by other, very different men. To make this quite plain to the reader would require me to write the history of Judaism; it must suffice to refer in passing to the excellent popular history of Professor C. F. Kent as supplying the most necessary information on the course of events after Ezra.

Nehemiah's second visit still remains to be mentioned. It was probably the failure of Ezra and the scarcity of practical leaders at Jerusalem which drew Nehemiah a second time from Susa. His main objects were three; they are those which, if Neh. 10:29-39 may be trusted, were prominent with the signatories of the great covenant, viz., the abolition of mixed marriages, the consecration of the sabbath, and the provision of regular supplies for the temple services and for the priests and Levites. Evidently Nehemiah's chief interest on this occasion was ecclesiastical; it would seem as if, though Ezra is not mentioned, the party of Ezra had appealed to Nehemiah to "come over and help" them. Great must have been Artaxerxes' friendship for Nehemiah to account for the furlough once more given to the royal cup-bearer. Nehemiah's narrative is so plain, so graphic, and so credible that I see no necessity for repeating it. I will only refer to one important act—the expulsion of a son of the high priest Joiada, who had married a daughter of Sanballat, and from the language of Neh. 13:29 (especially if we adopt corrected readings) it appears that the son of Joiada was not the only person who felt Nehemiah's severity. "Remember it to them, and not to me," says Nehemiah, "that I have attained priestly dignitaries."¹¹ The son of Joiada was, no doubt, the Manasseh of whom Josephus speaks¹² in connection with the erection of a Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim under Alexander the Great.

¹¹ Corrected text.

¹² *Antiquities*, XI, viii, 2-4. The date given by Josephus is a hundred years too late.

One or two reflections may be permitted me on the personal religion of Ezra and Nehemiah. It was, at least in germ, individualistic, and in this respect it pointed forward to Jesus Christ. We should wrong these great men if we judged them merely by a reference to the priestly legislation which Ezra introduced. That legislation was planned primarily in the interest of the community and not of the individual, and yet, when this legislation was carried out by men like Ezra and Nehemiah, on whom the lessons of that great individualistic preacher Ezekiel had not been thrown away, it conduced in spite of itself to individualism. In fact, no one who honored the work of the great prophets could fail to spiritualize the otherwise childish or childlike provisions of the law — childish or childlike I call them, not at all in contempt, but because they are the developments of the laws of bygone ages. The law was necessary to prevent a recurrence of the great calamity of the past, which was the defilement and profanation of God's people. But though the members of God's people could not forget that the people was greater than themselves, and was the inheritor of the divine promises, yet they also knew that they were responsible to God as individuals, and that only by the righteousness of individuals could a new and worthier people be built up. Both Ezra and Nehemiah show the germs of individualism in their piety. "Both I and my father's house have sinned," says Nehemiah (Neh. 1:6); "I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to thee, my God," are the opening words of the confession of Ezra (Ezra 9:6).

Next, I would ask leave to point out the immense blessing which accrued to the Jewish community from not having a strictly homogeneous Bible. With the Old Testament in their hands, it was impossible for them so to press the extreme statements of one book as to contradict the counterbalancing statements of another. And in all the noblest minds we cannot doubt that what may be called the evangelical elements in the Old Testament predominated over those of a childish or childlike character, suitable only to an early stage of spiritual development. The case has been similar with the Latin church. Let

us not be too hard on the legalism of that great institution ; it can also point with just pride to its evangelicalism. When Jews of the noble type referred to observed the multitudinous precepts of the traditional laws, they were not conscious of any inappropriateness in them ; they lifted up both themselves and the law which they observed into a sphere where all is alike natural and delightful, for God is all and in all. "Wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good" (Rom. 7 : 12).